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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL

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TAGS: PHUM SOCI PGOV PREL VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: UBCV LEADERS MEET DESPITE GVN INTERFERENCE

11. (SBU) Leaders of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) met September 18-20 in Binh Dinh Province, according to UBCV Deputy Thich Quang Do, despite some overt GVN efforts to prevent the meeting from taking place. This is the first time the UBCV leadership has been able to gather together since the release from pagoda detention of UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do himself earlier this year. The meeting, which focused largely on personnel issues and strategies for seeking government recognition, took place at Nguyen Thieu Pagoda in Quy Nhon City, the current home of Thich Huyen Quang.

12. (SBU) Thich Quang Do told ConGen the GVN had tried to prevent some of the monks from reaching Quy Nhon, succeeding in at least one case. He, UBCV General Secretary Thich Tue Sy, and others had been able to travel from HCMC on September 15 without difficulty. Others in their traveling party had been approached by the authorities a few days before the trip and told not to associate with the UBCV or take any leadership role in the organization. These monks still chose to go to Quy Nhon, however, and linked up with Thich Quang Do unimpeded.

13. (SBU) The GVN had unpredictable luck in trying to prevent other UBCV leaders from traveling, according to the UBCV Deputy. A contingent of five monks, including Thich Thien Hanh, were driving through the rugged Hai Van Pass from Hue when their driver received a call on his mobile phone telling him that his wife was in labor. The five monks managed to hitch a ride the rest of the way in a truck while their own driver returned to Hue. Thich Hai Tang of Quang Tri Province did not fare so well, however. Police twice prevented him from boarding vans for Binh Dinh, then escorted him back to his pagoda in a police car and kept him there until the meeting ended.

14. (SBU) Thich Quang Do also noted that Nguyen Thieu Pagoda was surrounded by local religious affairs officials and police throughout the meeting. While the authorities never entered the actual meeting room at any time, he believed their searches of the pagoda before the meeting were merely clumsy attempts to plant listening devices. Despite these problems, Thich Quang Do readily acknowledged that no one had attempted to interfere with the proceedings once the meeting had begun. He promised to provide a more detailed readout of the discussions in a future meeting with ConGenoffs. He also thanked the ConGen for its concern over his recent successful medical procedure to open a blocked artery.

15. (SBU) Thich Quang Do expressed concern that the GVN seemed to be taking a step backward from the open-minded attitude displayed by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai during his meeting with Thich Huyen Quang in Hanoi earlier this year. As further evidence, Thich Quang Do noted that a small delegation from the HCMC Committee on Religious Affairs had visited him on September 11 (Mid-Autumn Day) to remind him that the UBCV still had no legal status.

16. (SBU) In a separate conversation prior to the meeting in Quy Nhon, Thich Quang Do had told ConGen he regretted sending a letter criticizing the GVN for allegedly kidnapping former UBCV monk Thich Tri Luc from Cambodia (where he had gained UNHCR refugee status) last year and holding him secretly in detention until now. Blaming the mistake on poor internal UBCV communication and long periods of detention, he said he had not known that Thich Tri Luc had "secularized" in 1997. Under the circumstances, Thich Quang Do said he did not plan to press the issue any further with the GVN. But neither does he plan to retract his previous erroneous letter. Thich Quang Do did provide ConGen with a copy of the invitation the former monk's family had received from the HCMC People's Court inviting them to attend his trial. While the trial has been postponed indefinitely, Thich Quang Do promised to notify ConGen if the family received any additional communications from the court.

17. (SBU) Comment: Thich Quang Do and Thich Tue Sy were much more sanguine in their characterization of events than the flurry of press releases from the UBCV's Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB) citing systematic interrogations and threats of reprisals. Instructive, perhaps, was Thich Tue Sy's recent comment to ConGen that the IBIB often publishes things which are "incorrect."

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